Racism Within the Comfort Zone

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Racism Within the Comfort Zone

by Azure_K_Mello

Summary

JT arrives and Will has a quiet night before his anticipated (read dreaded) party. Discussions of racism and the past come up but Will has people to talk to and, really, isn't communication key to a happier life?

Notes

This story is more about interpersonal relationships and Will's world view rather than his romantic life. Though it's slightly out of the 'verse's normal purview, I enjoyed writing it and feel it's not out of the scope entirely. After all, the 'verse is call "Friendship is Not My Forte" not "Dating is Not My Forte."

Also, I know Hugh Dancy is white, but this isn't about Hugh it's about Will. Race and racial features are, as this story discusses, incredibly complicated topics. I know that I think of myself as a Briton, my mum traced her blood back centuries. There is no one important or cool in our past. They were all poor, uninteresting working people. They were the people getting conquered by the Normans, Romans and Vikings. My mum's side is short people with dark hair, pale skin, green eyes who are all slightly hairy: textbook Britons. But on my dad's side there are Romanians who gave me the eyebrows I fight with continually.

I hope no one finds the liberties I have taken to be offensive. If you find the discussion of race in anyway offensive, I apologize.

See the end of the work for more notes

The next thing he knew, it was morning. He painted the walls of his mind while and tried to convince himself that yesterday was over and gone. It took much longer than usual to get himself mentally prepared for the day. He stepped into underwear, brushed his teeth and went downstairs. Hannibal was in the kitchen and smiled at him. “You slept soundly.”

“Having you close helps,” admitted Will.

Hannibal smiled, “Knowing that makes me feel even better about coming home last night.”

“Home?” repeated Will.

“My house is beginning to feel more and more like just a house and this place feels more and more like home. Does that bother you, Will?”

“No, Hannibal, I like it,” said Will. He kissed Hannibal and said, “You’re making smoothies?”

“Green tea for caffeine — not as much as coffee but enough to stop withdrawal — cashews, blueberries, raspberries, yogurt, powdered maca root and maple syrup: zinc, fatty acids, vitamin C, folic acid and cortisol all have soothing properties.” He pointed at a pot on the stove, “Oatmeal increases serotonin. The science connecting food’s chemistry to the body’s is very soft, but it doesn’t hurt to try.”

Will laughed, “I didn’t have any of these things in my kitchen.”

Hannibal nodded, “I went to the store a couple of hours ago.” Hannibal handed him a full glass and a bowl of oatmeal. He served himself and they sat down at the table.

“I’m sorry, Hannibal,” said Will.

“You have nothing for which to apologize,” Hannibal stroked his cheek. “What time is JT coming for dinner?”

“Five, We’ll take the dogs for a walk before you get home,” he said, using the word Hannibal had brought to the table. “I thought I’d make Cajun paella. It’s easy, one pot, no careful timing, and it frees up the rest of the stove and the oven for you. I’m sure you need it to make stuff for tomorrow.”

“I do,” said Hannibal. “Thank you for being so considerate.”

Will scoffed, “Hannibal, after the last week or so, you don’t need to thank me for anything.”

“Taking care of you is not selfless; it is not a kindness; it is not a favor. I want you to be happy; I want you to be relaxed; I love your smile; I love your calm body language. When I help you, I’m helping bring out all the best qualities of the man I love. It’s selfishness that motivates me. It’s all self-serving.”

Will smiled, “That’s BS, but thank you for trying to make me feel like I’m not a burden.”

Hannibal put his hand out, palm up on the table. “Will?” Will gave in and met Hannibal’s eye for a moment. He put his hand in Hannibal’s. “You are never a burden. I am tired from driving here very late and getting up very early, but helping is not a burden. Being in a healthy relationship means putting the most desperate needs of the person having a hard time as the top priority for both people. When I break several bones in my hand hunting, you’re going to have to help me cut my meat, tie my tie, shave my face. Will you consider me a burden when I need help?”

“No, I won’t,” said Will. Leaning over the table, he kissed Hannibal, “Thank you for being in a healthy relationship with me. I love you too.” They fell silent as they ate. Hannibal had served the dogs before Will had come down and they were now going in and out of the backdoor. “This is delicious oatmeal. I’m usually not a fan but this is really good.”

“Heavy cream and apple sauce substituted for water and milk,” said Hannibal.

Will laughed, “Heavy cream for breakfast?”

“It’s the most important meal of the day,” replied Hannibal.

Will laughed. They finished their meal and washed their plates. “Make out in the shower with me?” asked Will.

“Yes,” agreed Hannibal. They called the dogs in and locked the door. And upstairs they stripped each other, kissed and caressed as the water heated up.

Will enjoyed showering with Hannibal. He had never enjoyed sex and intimacy the way he did with Hannibal. When it was all steam, and just the two of them, time stopped. The whole world disappeared. Every touch was perfect. Will started to stroke them both to hardness and Hannibal said, “Is this what you want?”

“Sometimes I wish that the fields and woods went on for a thousand miles in all directions. That it was just us and at the edge of the woods would be New Orleans. Us here, alone, this is so perfect. Touching you makes it even better,”

They kissed, open mouthed and messy and Hannibal’s hand joined his. They stroked one another, moaning and kissing, enjoying each other’s bodies. Will came with a pant of Hannibal’s name and the man dropped his forehead onto Will’s shoulder as he came. Laughing, Will pulled him into a hug and Hannibal held him, rubbed his back. They started to wash each other.

Sighing, Will said, “Now, now I feel ready to start my day.” Hannibal made an agreeing noise and Will said, “Tilt your head back.” Hannibal did as asked and Will washed his hair. Hannibal returned the favor and Will luxuriated in the scalp massage Hannibal gave him. He couldn’t even let someone cut his hair but this felt good. Thinking that, Will asked, “Can you cut hair?”

“Your dad can teach me next time he’s here,” said Hannibal. They finished washing, turned off the water and got out to get dressed. They moved around one another, comfortable in their routines. But Will paused and said, “How do you tie a Balthus knot? When you break your

hand I'm going to need to know even though I think an open button at your throat would be so, so much more sexy."

"Do you really want me to be sexier in the office?"

Will laughed, "No, but I would remind you that I no longer wear Old Spice. Even a normal tie knot would let more of your throat breathe. You have a great neck." Hannibal laughed and then taught Will how to do the absolutely absurd knot. They laughed and kissed and Will said, "We have to go to work." They both shrugged into their suit jackets. Hannibal drove Will to Mort's house and as he got out, Will said, "See you around six-thirty?"

"Yes," agreed Hannibal.

"Have a good day," said Will.

Will drove back to school and got there ten minutes before his class. He had make up classes for students he'd missed, he'd been doing it more and more frequently. He got a text from Bev that read, "Hey, almost birthday boy, do you want lunch? If you're still stoned, I can make us fluffernutter, jam and Nutella sandwiches with Eggo waffles for bread."

He texted back, "I'm sober so that sounds disgusting. Jack's made me miss so many classes, I have three make-up ones this afternoon and one extra tomorrow. No time for lunch."

"Extra work on your birthday? Eww."

He spent the fifteen minutes between each class breathing. He locked the classroom door between classes. He didn't want any students coming in early. He heard the door handle rattle a few times but he ignored it. He took his stolen moments and cherished them, breathing so slowly. He taught back to back until four-thirty. Then he drove home to let the dogs out and eat a granola bar that Hannibal would have been disgusted by because of the sugar the mass produced snack contained. Will liked it, it had both chocolate chips and raisins. He and the dogs played in front of the house until a green Prius pulled up.

JT got out and Will said, "Feeling environmentally friendly?"

"It's a rental but gas prices up here are criminal so I'm glad of it." He crouched to stroke the dogs. "Happy birthday, by the way."

Will shrugged, "That's not until tomorrow. How'd it go at the lawyer's office?"

"That's privileged. I'm Abigail's lawyer, Will, you saw the contract."

"Well, is Abigail okay? Can you tell me that? Forget legal stuff: is my friend going to be faking her smile tomorrow night?"

"Well, as one friend to another: I don't like talking behind my friends' backs so call her and ask. I can wait."

Rolling his eyes a little, Will pulled out his cell phone and called her hospital. When a nurse picked up he said, "This is Will Graham, calling for Abigail Hobbs."

The nurse asked him to wait and then Abigail was on the phone saying, “Hey, Will, JT should be with you soon.”

“He’s here with me now. I asked if things were okay and he said that he couldn’t speak to me as he’s your lawyer. Instead, I’m asking you: how did it go at the lawyer’s?”

“I didn’t do anything illegal. I don’t like what I did but… I’m going to give you some stuff tomorrow. I’m going to give you the story of what I did: you might not want me to move in once you know. That part isn’t close to done, not as part of a published book. But, it tells the whole story. I’m also going to give you the stuff about you. That is done. But I’ll edit anything you don’t like.”

“Abigail, you are honestly the only person I would say this too: you can publish whatever you want about me. This is about getting the poison out of your wounds. Tell your story, however I fit into it. And as for whatever you did… family forgives each other. Whatever it was, it can’t be so bad as to make me not want you here. I promise.”

“Read it before you promise. It’s an awfully large promise and as for the parts about you… you’re who I have. You and Hannibal are the most important people. I want you to tell me, honestly, if you’re unhappy. But don’t read the pages tomorrow: keep your birthday happy. I’m excited for the party. I got the pretty invite. Hannibal needs to teach me that handwriting.”

Will laughed, “I know. His penmanship is outrageous.”

“Go hangout with JT. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Night, Abigail.”

“Will?” she said, as though he was just about to hang up on her and she didn’t want that.

“Still here,” he promised.

“I love you,” she said and there was a sad note. Whatever it was that she had done wasn’t illegal but it obviously hurt to think about. It was the first time she’d said it to him.

“I love you too, Abigail,” he said it and meant it. “I’ll see you tomorrow night when you come home and, in two weeks, your bedroom will be ready for furniture and posters of boybands, New Kids on the Block or whatever it is you kids listen to nowadays.”

“I listen to Simon and Garfunkel and New Kids on the Block had broken up by the time I was born, Will.”

“Okay, posters of Paul Simon.”

She laughed, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Night, Abigail,” he hung up. Looking at JT he said, “I’m glad it wasn’t illegal, whatever it was.”

JT licked his teeth and said, “All I can say, as your friend and hers, is that she needs her friends now. She needs you, Hannibal, Alana. I think the party will be good for her.”

Will smiled, “You want to go for a walk?” Nodding toward the construction noises he said, “My father’s house is under construction. Gaétan Chervais’ son Léonce is working on it.”

“Gaétan who you worked with down the docks?” asked JT.

“Bizarrely, yes,” said Will.

“Weird,” said JT. “I want to see.” They walked through the woods and JT said, “All of this land is yours?”

“I want more. If Christopher Robin can get one hundred acres why can’t I?”

“Your role model is a five-year-old from the 1920s?” asked JT.

“Some people aspire to be the next Charles Manson,” said Will, not answering the question. The dogs kept bringing them toys to toss.

“They’re such good boys,” said JT.

“We’ll see how good they are when we get to the construction site,” said Will. They approached and Will crouched, “Boys, stay, play.” He spoke with authority and they did as told. He and JT went over to the site. It had a little net fence that they stepped over. He saw Evan and said, “Hi, Evan. This is my friend JT, he’s up from Nuorleans. JT, this is Evan, he’s the onsite foreman.” Evan and JT shook hands and Will was grateful that he had avoided the action when he had come here the first time.

Evan started explaining the progress and Will and JT and they listened attentively. “We’re on schedule,” he finished.

“I didn’t come to check up,” said Will.

JT laughed, “I just wanted to say ‘hi’ to Léonce. I know his dad.”

“Does everyone in New Orleans know his dad?” asked Evan. “Is his dad famous?”

“No,” said JT. “He used to drive Will to work every day and I went down to the docks at least three times a week to eat lunch with Will.”

Will spotted Léonce and gave a very small wave. Léonce came over and Will said, “Léonce, ça isit JT Lydeck. JT, this is Léonce Chervais.” Léonce smiled and spoke in quick Creole French, explaining that he was a big fan of JT’s writing. And Will said, “JT speaks just enough Creole to sing along with zydeco songs.”

Léonce’s eyebrows rose, he said, “The way you write about the Quarter and Treme, I assumed you were Creole.”

“I grew up in Treme, but I don’t speak Creole. I’m whi-” he got half way through the word and then abruptly stopped talking. “Wow, I’m not finishing that… sorry.”

Léonce eyebrows rose higher. But instead of reacting angrily he said, “Our city’s so racist even the nice people say it.”

Evan looked confused. And Will explained, “JT doesn’t speak Creole, even though he’d from the Creole area, because he’s white. Stop looking so ashamed, JT, you stopped yourself. Nuorleans is racist; you aren’t.” Then he laughed, “I met a hot guy at the Zydeco Festival. It turned out he lived up here. We went on a date and he said that if he hadn’t seen me with my family, especially my brothers Alex and George, I could have passed for white. Then he started breaking it down for me: my hair looks Spanish, my eye sockets and nose are Native American and it’s really just my cheekbones and jawline that are French. Then he pointed out that my complexion is all down to my dad. I left before we ordered appetizers. He was racist.”

“Wow,” said JT. “So was he saying he wouldn’t have gone out with you if you didn’t pass for white?”

Will nodded. “Most people outside of New Orleans think I’m totally Western European. It’s only Louisianans and some Texans who notice.”

Léonce nodded, “Most people think I’m Hispanic and black. I did one of those send away DNA tests. It said I’m seventy-four percent French and German Caucasian. But I don’t think I’m white. Cops don’t think I’m white.” The darkness of that statement made Will laugh, involuntarily and Léonce gave him a wicked smile. “Mô pèr thinks looking Creole helped Alex’s election.”

“I agree with your dad,” said Will. “My brother looking Creole helped him get into office. City might be racist, but people liked the idea of a born and bred mayor. Nothing more Nuorleans than a Creole boy.”

“It’s a shame he’s an asshole,” said JT.

Léonce’s eyes went wide. It was clear that he had never met Alex. Despite the fact that Alex spoke Creole French in public and talked about being Creole, he didn’t associate with many Creoles because they tended to be poor. Ever since Alex had started making money, he’d avoided even brushing shoulders with poverty.

Not addressing Léonce surprise at JT’s assessment of his brother, Will said, “No one ever notices it until they talk one on one with him. Sadly, by then they’ve already voted.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Léonce,” said JT. “You’re dad’s a great guy.”

“I really like your writing,” said Léonce. “You keep bad cops honest.”

JT smiled, “Well, I try to.”

“You see my daddy recently?”

With a nod, JT said, “Terrible haircut right now.”

“My sister is at beautician school,” said Léonce.

“In that case, it was a great attempt,” said JT, making Léonce laugh. “I came up for Will’s birthday and when he said you were here I wanted to say hi. Also wanted to see where Richard is going to be living.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Léonce looking around.

“Not as pretty as the Mississippi at sunset,” said JT.

Will laughed. Buster started barking, an irritated noise. “We should go, they’re going to get restless in a minute.”

“It was nice to meet you,” said JT.

“Big fan,” said Léonce, shaking his hand. Will and JT went back through the fence.

“It’s weird hearing Creole so far north,” said JT. They met the dogs and picked up their toys, starting to walk back toward the house.

“This far north, it’s weird talking about how a lot of people think I’m not white,” Will shrugged. “No one up here thinks I’m anything but white. In Louisiana, people can be racist or familial when they look at my face. Here, I’m just another white boy.”

“I feel like an asshole.”

“You are white,” said Will. “Visually at least, Léonce isn’t. I’m not, if you know what to look for. It’s only racist if you think you’re better than us. Other people might be offended that you implied that whiteness and being Creole are mutually exclusive, or that whiteness is purely based on skin tone. But I’m not offended: Léonce are I aren’t white, not totally. You grew up in Treme. You don’t think you’re separate from us, or different or that we’re second class. You think we’re all just poor kids — yourself included. The only thing you really said is that we get to be bilingual by default. You had to work to learn a second one.”

“And French isn’t even close to Creole which makes interviewing some people back home so much harder,” said JT.

“My dad could help you study, if you want,” offered Will. “I could but it’s harder over the phone. You should go have lunch with him at the docks. You can have a conversation and he can correct your French to Creole.”

“You just want your daddy to have constant company.”

“That is true; I do like my daddy to have friends,” agreed Will. “But, I also think it would make your job easier.”

Thinking back to JT’s words, he thought that what was really interesting about the exchange was that the other men at the construction site probably didn’t understand how JT’s statement

— that he didn't speak Creole as he was white — could be viewed as offensive at all. Political correctness could be so intricate, interwoven and insular that his words wouldn't have been noticed at all by the others if JT hadn't corrected himself and apologized. They were too far north for the construction team to understand that racism. Race was never easy, and yet always so large. Will thought of Daniel Blue and how he'd been so quickly labeled as a gang member because of the color of his skin.

Some Creoles self-identified as white. As it all dated back to French people, it was possible to be white, in both appearance and DNA. Those white Creoles could feel excluded from their own culture when race was discussed and focused instead on ethnicity. Of course, melanin shade or nose shape weren't all that defined race. In the seventeenth century, all Creoles, regardless of appearance or percentage of European blood, were classified as black. Because of that, some Creoles identified as white in an unconscious response to the offensiveness of having the government pigeonhole them as something they didn't believe themselves to be. To those people, his words would have been offensive because they would have said, "I'm white too, idiot. Being Creole doesn't make you not white. And being white doesn't stop you from being Creole."

You could be white and Creole but, as with any population living in a racially diverse place, very few people were completely European in their DNA. However, some white Creoles were racist, and didn't like to be categorized as being connected with people of color. They would have replied to JT's words saying something along the lines of, "Don't lump me in with those people." But they wouldn't have said, "those people," the words they would have used were ugly.

Other Creoles with more complex backgrounds but with pale skin viewed it as, quite literally, whitewashing to be labeled as Caucasian because of appearance. There was a beauty in being Creole, being the product of so many different races. To many, being Creole meant being the embodiment of all the people of Louisiana. Many would feel that denying them their right to identify as a person of color because of their, "passing features," was what was actually offensive — not JT's words.

Other Creoles, with all different, beautiful and varied skin tones and features, might not have blinked at JT's words. Some might simply have agreed and taken his words very plainly: he was white. Still others might have agreed because they thought that white Creoles didn't really count as a part of their community.

For all those many reasons, in polite conversations between civil people, color and race were usually ignored when talking about Creole people. It was neater that way. No one got offended when it was referred to as a culture or an ethnicity.

Despite not being offended by JT's words it did make Will think. If he was asked point blank if he was white, he would have a hard time. He always left the voluntary race section blank on paperwork. He knew all his brothers identified as racially Creole. All of them, even Richy who looked as white as Will, marked "other" on those forms. Having never known his mother, and having only mixed with his Creole cousins at Christmas, at the Zydeco Festival and sometimes in the summer, Will had always solely identified as his father's son. He was Richard Graham's son — that was his identity.

His father was white and Will had stopped there, never classifying himself as one race or another. He identified as a Creole person, it was his food, music, culture. His father had raised them as Creoles and Will felt that in his bones. But as for race, he felt nothing. When speaking of race, he always said that his mother was Creole, never fully connecting himself to the group, but also not distancing himself. He was not ashamed of his language or his blood. And, it would feel like a lie, having seen pictures of his beautiful tan-skinned mother, to tick the "white" box on those forms. But, it also wouldn't have felt right to tick "other." He thought of Daniel Blue again and silently he acknowledged that he was lucky to rarely be judged just for his race when he was outside certain parts of the South.

The house came into view and Hannibal's Bentley was parked out front. That cleared his mind of his thoughts. His night could go back to normal once he was in the other man's company. They headed up the porch steps and, as he opened the door, he called, "Hannibal, we're home."

"I'm making a marinade," said Hannibal. Will and JT went into the kitchen. And Will smiled, just seeing the man's back made him happy.

Hannibal turned and Will saw his tie, it was thin, plain black and tied with a Kent knot. Will laughed, "Thank you."

"This tie and knot do not impress anyone," said Hannibal.

"No, it lets your collar lay flat and lets your neck speak for itself. Your neck has a lot to say and your ties usually shout over it," he leaned over the table to kiss him. The scent of garlic and red wine hit him. Pulling away slowly Will said, "That smells good."

"Good meat doesn't need a marinade. But, a good marinade is to a prime rib as a well cut suit is to a handsome man." He pecked Will on the lips and then turned to JT. "It's good to see you again, JT."

"You too, Hannibal. I like the tie. An impressive tie undercuts your impressive personality."

Hannibal gave a small laugh. "I'm testing it out. We're also testing out your girlfriend's cake recipe."

"It's a good recipe but, sadly, happily, inevitably, she's no longer my girlfriend." Will laughed as he took lemonade ice tea from the fridge. "What?" asked JT.

"Nothing, you're going to like my friend Bev. I don't think we have any alcohol other than the dessert wine. We might have a beer left… somewhere. The fridge is very full because of the dinner party. I could dig for it but is lemonade ice tea okay?"

"Perfect, much more normal than you having booze in the house."

"There were guests and a party. I was asking you a favor then," Will shrugged, pouring three glasses. "I don't need to butter you up now."

He handed them off and they clinked glasses, “Cheers,” said Hannibal, “to friendships that last through years and distance.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said JT. They all took a sip and he said, “Anything I can do to help with the cooking?”

“I have everything under control for tomorrow and Will swears his paella is easy.”

With a smile, JT said, “I don’t know if it’s easy but I know Will’s paella is good cold the next day.”

Hannibal made little bite sized things, putting stuff into the fridge and chopping things continually. Will said, “Hannibal, let me know when you can give up one of the large stove rings for an hour.”

“You can have one now. I only need one of the four right now.” Will started the rice and started preparing everything else as Hannibal continued to make tiny things and JT stroked the dogs.

“So, what have you two been up to?” asked Hannibal.

“We went over to Daddy’s house. JT met Léonce. We talked about ingrained racism.”

“I’m apparently a jackass who subconsciously believes that Creoles aren’t white,” said JT.

Hannibal thought, and looked slightly bemused, “Will’s family is Creole and he’s white,” he said, “obviously some Creoles are white.” Will gave a bitter laugh and Hannibal looked at him with confusion. “What’s funny?”

“I was thinking, just a few minutes ago, how grateful I am that the section that asks about race on any paperwork or application is always optional. I usually don’t think about it. I say my mother was Creole my dad is white and move on. I avoid discussions about race.” Hannibal still looked confused and Will sighed. “When people are discriminated against and say that it’s because they’re a person of color sometimes people say they’re playing the race card. They aren’t; there’s a good chance it was because of race. As someone who doesn’t deal with that, in some ways, I feel like I cannot claim to be a person of color. I don’t face racism regularly. But, in Nuorleans, I have had cops call me ‘boy’ before they realized I was also a cop. They apologized but the sneer on their lips didn’t change. So, in some ways, I don’t feel I can call myself white. I also think it is disloyal to the woman who died to get me into the world to claim to white. I don’t feel I’m connected to either group. Growing up, I always classified myself as just poor trash; not white trash. I was raised by a white dad speaking Creole with that culture. My ethnicity is Creole, my race is,” he exhaled and shook his head. “Let me show you something.”

He washed his hands clean of the chicken and sausage juices from the food he’d been preparing. On the shelf in the living room, there was a photo album. His dad had given it to him when he started college. He said it was to stop Will from getting homesick. Will didn’t think that was quite the truth. There were pictures of his mother, a woman he couldn’t miss or long for when away from home. In actuality, Will thought his dad wanted to pass the photos

down and didn't trust any of his other sons to take care of them. He brought the book back to the kitchen and opened it to a page of pictures of his parents together. They were dating, in swimsuits, in prom cloths and in wedding attire. Pointing to his mother Will said, "Is she white?"

It was an easy question. Her bronze skin, her almond eyes and so many other tiny aspects of her appearance made the answer evident. Her green, grey, blue eyes shone out of her tan face. Will had the same eyes but his pale skin stopped them from standing out. He had the same hair, same nose, but none of the things that really marked a Creole in a pronounced fashion. At least, not in a way that anyone up North would recognize. "No," said Hannibal.

"Would her kids be white?" Will followed up.

"No," said Hannibal, "but your father is a very pale man."

"Exactly," said Will.

"Your mother was a very beautiful woman," said Hannibal.

Will nodded, "Thank God they met young. Dad's a good-looking guy but she's way out of his league. At fourteen they were equals," he said, pointing to a picture of them, very young. They were both good-looking enough kids. They weren't beautiful but they made a handsome couple. "By the time they got married: he's a man and she's a model."

"Wow," said JT looking at the pictures, "I've never seen your dad look so young. You look so like your mom. I knew you didn't look much like your dad but you really resemble her."

"Aww," said Will sarcastically, "are you calling me pretty?"

"You know I think you're beautiful," said Hannibal honestly as JT sarcastically said, "Yes, Will, you're a pretty, pretty princess." Will laughed as he went to put the book back on the shelf.

Back in the kitchen Hannibal said, "Are you okay?"

"Y'know how Zeller's been being weirdly nice and inclusive lately?" Hannibal nodded. "We had a case and he was a racist." He told them about Daniel Blue and said, "He never would have suggested drug dealer if Daniel Blue was white. I called him out on it. I've been thinking about racism lately, that's all."

"And I'm the ass who made it part of this evening," said JT.

Will shook his head, "JT, you got half way through a racist statement, realized it, stopped and apologized. You can stop apologizing. You aren't a racist. The language we were handed to discuss the topic is racist. Relax. I'm not friends with racists. You wouldn't be at this table if you were a racist."

"Brian Zeller isn't here," pointed out Hannibal.

Will felt uncomfortable as he said, “He’s trying to make it up. He was racist but he wasn’t aware of it. He doesn’t want to be a racist.” Hannibal pulled cakes out of the oven. “That smells good.”

“It’s lemon and pear with a chocolate ganache,” said Hannibal. “Happy birthday, Will.”

Will started to devein shrimp as Hannibal started to make a custard thing. “What’s that?” asked Will.

“Crème brulee,” said Hannibal.

“But you’re doing cake,” said Will.

“Do you habitually throw dinner?” asked Hannibal. “I didn’t realize you were an expert.”

Will raised his hands in surrender. “Just keep in mind that there are only six of us.”

Nodding, Hannibal said, “That’s why it’s six courses instead of seven.”

“Six courses?” repeated JT.

“Oysters Rockefeller, a chilled cucumber and mint soup, the roast and accompanying dishes, sorbet, salad, cheese and dessert.”

“That’s seven,” said Will.

“Sorbet is not considered a course,” said Hannibal.

“Then, what about all those bite sized things?” said Will, pointing to the fridge.

“You and Beverly are coming straight from the FBI, JT will come sometime around then, but Alana isn’t bringing Abigail until six and I don’t want to rush into dinner. We’ll sit down at seven. Those are just hors d'oeuvre, while we wait for dinner.” He gave Will a small smile, “I’m not using Italian linen or sterling silver flatware. There is no dress code, no servers, no candles. We’ll have zydeco music playing and dogs underfoot. Just let me have six courses and a properly set table.”

“How many forks are there going to be?” asked Will.

Hannibal smiled, “Just work from the outside in.”

“And how many desserts are there in the dessert course?” asked Will.

“If you didn’t always shy away from my dinner parties, we wouldn’t have ended up here. I am pulling out all the stops. But I’m glad you did skip those parties. You wouldn’t have liked any of the unique meats I served. This party caters to your tastes. Instead of swan, otter or bear, we have a tasting plate with cake, small crème brulee, lemon meringues in shot glasses, a pomegranate truffle and miniature gingersnaps with a hot blueberry compote.”

“Five desserts?” said Will.

“They’re all small. I’ve already made the gingersnaps, the compote, truffles and the lemon layer of the lemon meringues. I have tomorrow afternoon off. I rearranged my appointments the minute you agreed to a party. All you have to do is turn up and eat. Everything is small portions. I promise, you won’t be uncomfortably full or displeased. This is your party, Will, it’s designed for you: it will not be uncomfortable or too much.”

Will nodded and added the shrimp to the pot. Hannibal put together the stuff he needed for the cake they were planning on having after the paella. They moved around each other and Will kissed him when Hannibal’s cheek was close to his. “I’m sure it will be fun.”

End Notes

Kudos and comments are much appreciated.

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